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On not observing the baby

Susie Rose, London

On not observing the baby' describes a one-year infant observation in which the mother seemed unable to take in the experiences of her baby. It explores the reasons for this; and what the consequences were for the baby, and for the observer. The paper also questions the mother's unconscious phantasies about the role of the observer. The main conclusions reached in the paper are that the mother's own sadistic feelings towards the baby, and overwhelming anxieties that the baby would not survive, made it impossible for her to contain the baby's own terrifying fears and anxieties. This led to the baby experiencing what Bion has described as 'nameless dread'. The baby appeared to turn away from the frustrating object to a withdrawn and omnipotent state, attempting to protect herself by the formation of what Bick has described as a second skin. The paper suggests that the unprocessed fears of death and annihilation made it painful for the observer to become truly involved with observing the baby, and that what the mother wanted from the observer was not observation, but help to keep her baby alive.

Keywords

Containment; mother's feelings; mother's unconscious phantasies; nameless dread; second skin formation.

Introduction

Abby is a baby who was difficult to observe. During the year that I visited her family, she often went unobserved by her mother, Sally; left large gaps in my observations, and had only a precarious place in my seminar group as we all found her hard to keep in mind.

My lasting sense of Abby is that of a baby who has had to manage very much on her own, without the help of a mother who was able really to see her and to become truly involved with her. I believe that what was not possible for this mother was to 'serve as a repository', and help to give meaning to the infant's feelings.¹ This is what I hope to explore in this paper: by focusing on the notes of my visits, the experiences in my seminar group, and my own feelings that were evoked by the observation, I hope to examine the effects of this lack of containment on the development of Abby's internal world, and her relationship with her mother; and also look at how this may have contributed to my, and my seminar group's, difficulties in observing Abby.

It is my feeling that Abby's development has been impaired by the lack of an understanding and reflective object to introject, perhaps leaving her with what Bion would call 'nameless dread'.² I also wonder that as both Sally and Abby could not get beyond a certain point in digesting their experience without becoming overwhelmed, perhaps it felt for me, also, that to observe fully and get close to these undigested feelings would be too overwhelming.

Background

I was put in touch with Sally, Abby's mother, via her GP. I was contacted by Sally a week after she had received my letter, and after a very brief telephone conversation, we agreed to meet. During this initial conversation, Sally referred to the infant observation as 'baby monitoring', and apart from telling me she worked from home in her own business, she gave me no information and asked no questions at all. In this conversation, there was a hint of what was to follow in the observation. Sally showed a lack of curiosity by not having asked any questions, as well as a reluctance to offer any information about herself. In addition, her use of the phrase 'baby monitoring' possibly indicated her anxiety about the welfare of her new baby, as if it would need to be monitored very closely, perhaps by an outside person and not just by her.

Sally is a thirty-six-year-old woman who has been living in England for eighteen years. She is married to Peter, who is also in his mid thirties, who is English, and works in a well paid job. They had been married for ten years, but Abby was their first child, as Sally felt that she wanted to wait to have children until her career was established.

Preliminary meeting

My first impression at the preliminary meeting was of a beautiful, large house, but with quite a hard, designed feel to it, with wooden floors and

a sharp, angular interior design, very neat and tidy. Throughout the observation, Sally was friendly but distant. I found her to be an intelligent but aloof person, who I enjoyed spending time with, but who made me wonder if she ever allowed anyone to get close to her. I met Peter only twice, both for short times, and consequently it was difficult for me to get any sense of him or his role in the family.

The preliminary meeting was important in terms of the themes of the observation right from the moment I arrived:

I arrived on time at five o'clock, and Sally opened the door. She said that she was on the telephone, and asked if I could wait. I stood in the hallway by the front door and waited for ten minutes. It was a very uncomfortable ten minutes, where I felt as if I were not quite in the house, and yet not quite outside either.

The idea of being inside or outside, or not quite either, became important as the observation progressed. At this stage, I was just aware of my discomfort and lack of welcome, but later in the observation wondered about this early, powerful communication in terms of both Sally and Abby. I wondered what was allowed to be kept inside Sally's mind and what had to be kept outside, and where the new baby would fit into this; and I wondered what impact this would have on the new baby's ability to develop in relation to her internal and external worlds. As the preliminary meeting progressed:

I explained that the observation was for a year. Sally said, 'I don't know if the baby will still be here at the end of the first year'. I felt quite shocked when she said this, and didn't understand what she meant. She then said that because she works from home, she thinks she might have to 'send the baby out' of the house to a nanny share or childminder.

My shock at this comment revealed a very important theme in the observation. I had understood her to mean that the baby might die within the first year.

In retrospect, I believe that Sally herself had extreme anxieties about how the baby would survive, perhaps explaining the need for a 'baby monitor'; but it seemed more than a first time mother-to-be's anxiety. It was as if Sally had no sense of how the baby could be born, and so be outside of her, but still be connected to her so that she wouldn't just vanish. I was being told that this was a mother who did not have a sense

of how people are connected to each other, how they are kept in mind, and I wondered what keeping things in mind would mean for Sally. As the observation progressed, I also became increasingly worried about Abby's survival, both physical and psychic, and, in addition to Sally's projected fears, I believe that Abby's own unprocessed fears of annihilation were projected into both me and Sally.

Later in this first meeting, some light was shed on this feeling, as I understood it, that the baby would need monitoring by a third party in order to have any hope of staying alive, or not disappearing psychically. This also offered some possible insight into my role within this new, precarious family, and what I might represent to Sally, as it emerged that she had not, in fact, been brought up by her own parents, but by relatives:

When asked why she had responded to the letter, Sally said 'both my uncle and aunt are child psychologists, they were very important to me, they shared me with my parents. I don't know much about child development, although I would really like to, and I thought that it could be good to have a professional around who could help me'.

Although I explained to Sally that I didn't feel that I would be able to help in that way, as I was training and really there to learn myself, I feel that during the year, her desperate need for help, and bitter disappointment with me that I could not help her were also marked features of the observation. I later found out that Sally had an extremely poor relationship with her mother. Although Sally didn't tell me about this directly, she became upset when her mother was due to visit, speaking about her coldly, and she had already told me that she had not been brought up exclusively by her parents, as she had been 'shared'. I believe that she had responded to my letter with a deeply held belief that it is necessary to have 'a professional' around to share the work of the parents in order for the child to survive at all.

Before I left this preliminary meeting, Sally said that I would need to ring her in a week to see if she would agree to the observation, that she couldn't ring me because she didn't have my number any more. She said 'I'm surrounded by paperwork, and once we'd arranged to meet I binned you. I get rid of things once they're done, I don't like to keep bits of paper'.

I felt that Sally's comment was dismissive, as if I had been 'got rid of'. After some discussion in the seminar group, we wondered if her dislike of keeping bits of paper and need to get rid of things could represent some evidence of what keeping things in mind might mean for Sally,

perhaps that she easily feels her mind to be cluttered, and has to evacuate experience rather than digesting it. These thoughts became clearer later in the observation as I witnessed the interaction between Sally and her new baby.

I have focused in depth on this first meeting with the mother, as I believe it contains the seeds of themes that were to emerge in the rest of the visits, namely, fears for the survival of the baby, and evacuation of experience rather than digesting it. In addition, it is representative of the observation itself that a great deal of my focus was on the mother, and not on the baby. At this stage in the observation Abby was already noticeably absent, as Sally did not tell me much about her fantasies about the baby, whether she would be a girl or a boy, how her pregnancy had gone, how she felt about the impending birth, how she felt about having a child and becoming a mother. The only information seemed to be that she will 'send the baby out', as she herself was sent out.

The observer's role

My observations began when Abby was one week old exactly, and for the first eight weeks I observed her in the sitting room, lying in her cot. Sally said that she was very tired after the birth, but didn't tell me anything else about the birth in terms of her experience or Abby's. Abby was a small baby, with a slightly squashed appearance and dry, rough looking skin on her face. It was noticeable that Abby hardly smiled at all throughout this first half of the year.

The first eight weeks of Abby's life appeared to be characterised by an ongoing struggle between sleep and waking as she adjusted to life outside the womb; and Sally's ongoing struggle to respond to and care for her new baby as she adjusted to being a mother. These first visits also established something of my role as observer in relation to Sally, in a way that gave some insight into Sally's relationship to Abby. For example:

Observation at one week

I was sitting between Sally and Abby, and while I was observing Abby, Sally would ask me what she was doing. It seemed to be an important part of what was going on, me there as observer then telling Sally what I was seeing.

I believe that this was part of Sally's need for the 'professional' third person to help her to care for and 'monitor' her baby, that my role was as a digestive function, a way for Sally to take in aspects of the baby without the

undigested feelings and experiences provoked by direct contact. Perhaps this was also a role that Peter took in the family when he was there.

A second example of my role as observer as an indication of aspects of the mother-baby relationship was that in these first visits, there was something hopeful about Sally when she spoke to me, how she talked about Abby, and about my coming to observe Abby; but this hope soon fizzled out and went flat. I feel that this mirrors many interactions between Sally and Abby, where Sally starts out wanting and trying to connect with Abby, but it just never quite happens, and the hope turns to bitter disappointment and feelings of rejection, as if it is a repeated confirmation that all things turn bad.

Waking up

Returning to Abby's struggle between sleep and waking, this was a very noticeable part of these initial observations:

Observation at two weeks

Sally explained to me that Abby was in her waking-up phase, that it was very 'tortuous and strange' for Abby. In fact, Abby did appear to rouse from her sleep, scrunch up her face and rub her face with her hands in fists, look around with a startled expression, move her legs up and down, squeezing them into her body and stretching them out again, and then drift back into sleep. She did this many, many times over a period of about 35 minutes. Sally said that she had had to cut Abby's nails, because when she is waking up, her nails are 'ruthless'.

From my observations and Sally's comments, it seemed as though Abby was struggling with a great difficulty of crossing between her sleeping world and her waking world (which reminded me of the sense of being halfway inside and halfway outside, as I had felt in the hallway in the preliminary meeting). I wondered if Abby's difficulty with joining the waking world was at all connected to Sally's apparent perception of her as 'strange', 'ruthless' and scratching. Sally herself made a connection between Abby's sleeping and her feeding when she said that Abby had particular difficulty waking up long enough to be fed.

Feeding

The feeding relationship between mother and baby was a difficult one, and became increasingly difficult for me to witness. During this first period of the observation, I always saw Sally and Abby in the same sitting

room, and often had an impression of the two of them imprisoned in this one room, with no outside help or influence, battling with the task of feeding. This was obviously not the case, and I wondered about what my feelings might help me to understand about the relationship. Certainly, at the beginning, there was evidence that Abby had had a good experience of the breast, as she appeared to be comforted by a hallucinated breast,³ as this example from the first observation shows:

Observation at one week

Abby was lying on her back with her arms up by her head, her face was turned to the right and she seemed very peaceful. From time to time she screwed up her face, and her hands went into fists and she rubbed her eyes; she then made sucking movements with her mouth, and after each time she became peaceful again.

However, as time went on, it became clear that there were many difficulties with the feeding, and for these eight weeks, I observed the same painful scene of feeding, much like the following example when Abby was three weeks old. In order to feed, Sally would put a small, firm cushion on her lap, and then place Abby on top of this cushion in a very precarious way without actually holding her. She explained that this was how she had been told to feed the baby, and it seemed that she was not able to adapt a way of feeding that was more comfortable for them both. A marked aspect of the feeding was the constant break in the flow of feeding. Sally would allow Abby to feed for a few minutes, then take her off the breast. This way of feeding continued throughout the whole breastfeeding experience, and also became part of the solid food experience.

During discussions within the seminar group, we considered that Abby's struggle with waking up, with moving from her internal world to the external world, was perhaps due to the frustrating, teasing nature of the external world, represented by the frustrating, teasing breast, and the experience of repeatedly making contact with the nipple and the breast for a few moments, and then being stopped, so that she eventually gives up and turns away from the breast. It was also noticeable that there was little other physical contact between Sally and Abby during feeding. Abby would lie with her arms still by her sides, without touching Sally at all; and Sally only occasionally touched Abby's hand or face while she was feeding, and often did not look at her. With all the stopping and starting, it seems that Abby was not allowed to have the experience of a feed that

can be taken inside with thought and time and understanding, and actually be digested; but that it must be evacuated quickly by the sudden changes, perhaps to be burped out or excreted. Again, it's not really inside or outside.

Sally became worried about Abby's weight, worried that she was taking in enough, and although she meant physically, I felt that this could also be understood psychically, in terms of concerns about Abby taking in enough good experience to develop, as there seemed to be such a lack of contact between mother and baby. It was as if Sally very much wanted to make a link with Abby, breastfeeding her and caring for her, but was unable to as she did not have the psychic capacity herself. It was as if, with the cushions, she was trying to 'cushion' herself from the feelings that were being evoked in her, but as she was unable to protect herself, the relationship became more and more difficult. Abby did, in fact, remain a very small baby.

It seems as if, in Sally's mind, any idea of goodness, of a good feed cannot be stayed with for long; it turns to ideas of excretion, as in immediately thinking of nappy changes after a feed. It reminds me of our first interaction which started hopefully, but fizzled out; also, of the feeds themselves, which start optimistically, but end with great disappointment for both Sally and Abby.

Nappy changing

Sally did, in fact, change Abby's nappy directly after virtually every feed, leaving no time for Abby to take in the experience of the feed, or for mother and baby to enjoy the time together. Most of the times that Sally changed Abby after (or even in the middle of) feeds, resulted in Abby becoming extremely distressed. An example of this occurred in the Abby's eighth week:

Abby at eight weeks

Sally took Abby to the changing mat, and put her down. Abby began to cry. Sally took off her babygro, and Abby cried harder, pulling her legs up to her chest. Sally then took the nappy off, and went to the drawer to get another one, leaving Abby on the mat. Abby began to cry very hard, her face going from red to bright purple in quite an alarming way. Sally came back from the drawer and stood by the changing mat. After another few minutes of Abby screaming, Sally picked her up. Abby's crying got less desperate, although she was still crying. Sally put her down again. Abby began to scream, but Sally said she was going to

change her anyway. Abby turned her head to the lamp, and stared at the light from the lamp. She stopped crying, and became quite still.

From this example, it is possible to imagine in Abby a fear of annihilation. She becomes very distressed as soon as her nappy is taken off, as if she feels she is going to fall apart – perhaps reminiscent to her of the feeling when the nipple is taken out of her mouth. She finds temporary comfort from Sally, when she is eventually picked up, but this is short lived, as she is put down again very quickly as Sally is not able to make sense of Abby's distress. Abby then focuses on the bulb inside the lamp, and appears to use this in an attempt to hold herself together. This, together with the use of her body muscles and rigidity, seems to be very much what Bick describes in her theory about second skin formation.⁴ By this stage, Abby had developed severe eczema all over her body. This could also be viewed as a symptom of a disturbance in the containing function of the skin as a boundary.

The thumb

After the Christmas break, a new development had occurred that appeared to confirm our thoughts about second skin formation and ways for Abby to hold herself together – sucking her thumb. For Abby, her thumb seemed to provide a way for her to 'feed' herself, to hold and keep herself together in the midst of her fears and anxieties, without having to depend on an unreliable object. Another change that had occurred was that Abby now spent most of her time during the observations lying on a sheepskin mat on the floor under a mobile, instead of lying in her cot. Sally rarely picked her up, and when she did it was usually in an attempt to comfort her if she was crying. She would sit beside Abby and talk to her, but there was a noticeable lack of physical contact, which was perhaps also symbolic of a lack of psychical contact between them.

The first time I saw Abby suck her thumb was in her thirteenth week, the first visit after the break. Sally was getting Abby ready to feed, but before Sally was able to put her nipple in Abby's mouth, Abby put her thumb in her mouth instead, perhaps in an attempt to feed herself. Sally commented about the thumb sucking:

Observation at thirteen weeks

'The thing about Abby sucking her thumb is that she doesn't want to do anything else. She can sit for hours sucking her thumb'.

By her seventeenth week, the thumb-sucking seemed very much to have taken the place of a comforting and reliable breast and mother, as Sally commented:

Observation at seventeen weeks

Abby was awake under the mobile, looking up at it. She began to get a bit upset, and Sally said that she would find her thumb, hopefully. She did 'find her thumb', put it in her mouth and went back to sleep. Sally said 'when Abby does get upset and wants to go to sleep, she'll never be comforted by being hugged or held, she just wants to do it on her own, she has to be left alone to just drift off'.

In the first example, in the thirteenth week, I wondered if Abby's use of her thumb could be an attack on the withholding breast, perhaps an envious feeling of 'I've got one anyway'. However, in the example of seventeen weeks, it felt very painful to watch as an observer, and the sense was much more of the thumb as a sort of plug to stop a feeling of disintegration. In some ways, the thumb must be a representation of a good feeding experience, like the hallucinated breast, in order to provide the comfort, but that experience now appears to be used by Abby to withdraw into her own world. Perhaps it would be more accurate to think of a hallucinated nipple rather than breast, as Abby seems to want an immediate holding together experience which the nipple might represent, rather than something more thoughtful which the breast or nipple might represent. As I have described, when Abby was feeding at the breast she was held literally by the nipple and the cushion, as Sally did not actually physically hold her with her hands.

Also, as in the feeding experience, it is as if both Sally and Abby start off with some feeling of hope that there will be the possibility of a good experience, or good feed, but in fact they are not able to use each other in this way, and they both turn away. Abby turns to an omnipotent and self-sufficient way of functioning, denying the need for Sally which is so often frustrating, with the danger that this defence will impair her ability to develop an interest and curiosity in the external world, and a representation of a reliable, good object in her internal world.

Game playing

The frustrating and sadistic experience that Abby had of breastfeeding, which led to her thumb sucking and withdrawing, was also played out in 'games' that Sally played with Abby at this stage of the observation. I felt

disturbed by these games, and began to find it increasingly difficult to get across to the seminar group what was actually happening in the observation. I now believe that these games hold the core situation between Sally and Abby, which was Sally's inability to hold for long enough projections from Abby which she felt to be too disturbing, before giving them straight back.

One such game took place on Abby's seventeenth week, when Sally took Abby into the bathroom while she was hanging out the washing to dry. The game involved Sally dangling items of clothing in front of Abby's face tantalisingly, and then covering her face with the damp clothes, and leaving them there for several moments:

Observation at seventeen weeks

At one point, Sally put one of the wet babygros over Abby's face, and Abby's body sort of shook and shuddered. Sally took it off after a moment or two, and did it again, and again Abby's body shuddered and her legs went up in the air. She did it again, and left it there for a couple of moments. When she took it off, Abby looked very confused and distressed. Abby started to scream, but Sally screamed back at her. Abby stopped screaming, and cried. Abby then screamed again, Sally put her face up close to Abby's, opened her mouth as if to scream again, and then Abby became silent. Abby became very still, hardly moving her limbs at all.

In the seminar group, we understood this game to represent Sally's need to give back to Abby her wet and messy parts that Sally couldn't contain, as Sally's screaming back at Abby is a clear example of her inability to process any of Abby's discomfort; it just has to be got rid of. Additionally, the game seemed to be representative of Sally and Abby's experience, as things come and then they disappear; nothing can be counted on to stay. It was a very disturbing 'game', and I wonder what it must have felt like from Abby's experience, to receive her terror and distress back from Sally, in addition to Sally's own projections. From the resulting rigidity of her body, I would speculate that Abby felt overwhelmed with a fear of falling apart. The game is a sadistic game, not a game encouraging curiosity and thought. I, and the seminar group, began to find it difficult to digest the experiences of the observation, and we became increasingly concerned about Abby's ability for learning and development.

Little piranha

In the same visit, I observed a new behaviour in Abby that seemed to be related to her own sadistic phantasies. She was holding a small, yellow toy octopus in her hand, and, as Sally pointed out to me, Abby would dart her head forward to suck it, like 'a little piranha':

Observation at seventeen weeks

'... she does a very funny piranha thing, she holds it in her hand and then darts her head forward to suck it, almost like she thinks she's going to get some milk out of it'.

The use of the word 'piranha' gave an indication of Sally's phantasy of Abby as a greedy, damaging baby; but the actual darting, biting movement itself did seem to be evidence of Abby's own sadistic phantasies about the breast and 'getting some milk out of it' in a devouring, spoiling way. I wondered also about the toy octopus as the recipient of these biting attacks, as if it might represent an aspect of some monstrous, persecuting internal image.⁵

In the seminar group, we considered how Abby would be able to develop when there was no process for these frightening experiences and phantasies to be digested and given back to her in a less frightening form. It seemed that as well as having to receive Sally's unprocessed sadistic attacks, Abby was also faced with her own frightening internal world not being mitigated by the experience of a containing mother. We all understood why Sally had felt the need for a third person to help her with her baby, and wondered again about the role of the father.

Neighbour's nanny

However, around this time in the observation, Sally was able to receive some helpful advice from a neighbour's nanny about starting Abby on solid foods, and about giving her a nap in the middle of the day. When I arrived for a visit and was told about this advice, I felt enormously relieved, as if finally there had been some outside intervention from a third party. I believe that that was what Sally had expected me to provide, and I can only assume that my relief was in direct proportion to her disappointment that I had not provided this. In fact, by this stage I felt that I had been given up on as being useless, and frequently felt despondent in the visits. I imagine that my feeling of being useless and ineffectual was partly a projection of Sally's feelings of being useless and rejected by Abby; and that how I understood Sally to feel – a fear of

disintegrating if she didn't receive some help – was very possibly how Abby felt much of the time. It also is important to note how willing Sally was to use advice and help when she did receive it, and how desperately she wanted to be able to care for her baby.

From this point in the observation, there was less of a sense of Sally and Abby stuck in the sitting room with no contact with the outside world, and by Abby's twenty-second week, the last week before Easter, the visit took place in the kitchen, with Sally talking about outside events and friends. This change was reflected in Abby's behaviour, as she now began to pick up toys and did show some small curiosity in the outside world. I felt as if finally there had been some move between inside and outside, with both Sally and Abby being able to take some interest in the external world, as if they were both beginning to emerge from the post natal experiences into a new stage of development. Sally began to talk about finding a nanny for Abby.

When I returned after the Easter break, there had been several changes. The first was that virtually all the observations now took place in the kitchen, often centred on Sally feeding Abby. Abby had begun to eat solid foods over the break, and she had started teething. It became evident that I had missed out from my observations the impact of weaning on Abby; and it was striking that the seminar group also missed this, failing to pick up any signs of the impact of weaning on Abby or the fact that I had not noticed it. This was only one of many important aspects of development that were not part of my observations, and I would speculate that these absences were in part due to my, and Sally's, preoccupation with Abby's basic survival – whether she would physically survive, and whether she would be able to develop and survive psychically, as well as Abby's own strong fear of annihilation that was projected into us.

However, her curiosity in the world did appear to be developing, as she continued to play with her toys, although she still made no effort to reach them if they were not directly in front of her – and she now had a nanny, Polly. Although Sally continued to work from home, she employed Polly to look after Abby in the daytime, and Polly worked every weekday from 8.00am to 6.00pm, except Mondays, when Sally looked after Abby. On the days that she worked, Polly had sole charge of Abby.

Polly and play

Polly began working in the Easter holidays, and had been there for two weeks when I first met her. It appeared from what I observed that Polly was able to provide Abby with some digestive function, and in the observations when Polly was there, I felt enormously relieved. Watching Polly

and Abby had a different feel from seeing Sally and Abby, as there was not the constant break in the flow of activity and play which was characteristic of Sally's interactions with Abby, and which was so painful to observe in the breastfeeding. It became noticeable to me and the seminar group that my presentations were more observant and lively when Polly was with Abby, and it was felt that this was a reflection of Polly's capacities to digest some of the emotions that we had all been struggling with. Abby appeared to be more relaxed with Polly, and she began to smile and even to laugh.

Sally seemed happy to let Polly take over with Abby, although her envy was provoked by seeing another person elicit smiles and affection from Abby that she herself could not. This period of the observation was characterised by Sally's struggle between her envy of Abby's progress with Polly, and her growing anxiety that there was something wrong with Abby that was preventing her from developing; it was also characterised by Abby's continued struggle to develop – to crawl, to reach out for toys, to allow curiosity and meaningful contact to take place. On the visit in week thirty, there was an example of these struggles:

Observation at thirty weeks

Sally said that Abby still isn't crawling. 'It's not just that she isn't crawling, she doesn't show any signs at all of making a move towards crawling. She doesn't even show signs of moving towards sitting up on her own. It would be nice to have a sparky and active person, but she's a lazy baby. Maybe she's schizophrenic'. She continued to feed Abby, saying 'mad baby, mad baby, mad baby' as she put the spoon to Abby's mouth. Abby looked confused, moved her head away and began to make a growling noise. Sally said 'I don't know if it's because I'm rushing or something, but Abby doesn't have any problems eating with Polly, I've never heard Polly say that there was anything she didn't like or wouldn't eat, whereas I've already thrown away two things today'.

I feel that this example illustrates Sally's anxiety about there being something very wrong with her baby, and her difficulty in seeing Polly help Abby to progress, as if she herself could only offer mad, indigestible food, whereas Polly can offer tasty, appetising sustenance; she feels rejected by Abby. Abby did seem quite to enjoy eating, and generally did not appear fussy, although she would sometimes dart her head forward in the 'piranha' movement I had witnessed in previous observations, as if she felt that the experience of good food could not be relied on, and had to be grabbed. In this example, I felt that Abby's growling and turning

away were to do with Sally's rushing – not exactly that she was feeding Abby too quickly, but that she was not giving her small, mouth sized bits of food that she could take in in her own time and digest; and this seemed to me to be exactly what Abby's emotional experience would have been at that time, being bombarded with fears from Sally, as well as her own chaotic internal world, with very limited capacities to try and make sense of any of it. All this led to the now familiar turning away.

There were many examples over the next weeks of Abby's struggles to develop, with encouragement from Polly, and the frustrating 'game playing' from Sally that we have already seen. An example of both of these different ways of exploring the world was shown clearly in Abby's 40th week. The first example shows Abby with Polly, with some sense of a flow to the play, and between them, allowing Abby some space to allow her curiosity to develop:

Observation at forty weeks

When we got upstairs, Polly put Abby down on the floor, and gave her a piece of ribbon to play with. Abby seemed very excited by this piece of ribbon, she smiled and made a sort of chirrupy noise. Then Polly gave her an empty, small Gap box. Again, Abby seemed quite pleased. She put the ribbon in her mouth, and then leaned quite far forward to pick up the box. She took the ribbon out of her mouth, and, holding it in her fist, she banged her hands on the box. She then leaned right forward over the box, looking and feeling inside it.

In this example, Abby happily accepts the toy that Polly provides, and even makes some effort to get to it by leaning forward. The toy is a box, and this allows Abby's curiosity to come into play, as she bangs the outside of the box, and feels the inside. I thought she was building a concept of space within the self, helping her to develop an internal representation of inside and outside, along with the possible introjection of the containing function of Polly.⁶

This example is in contrast to the game played by Sally later in the same visit, where there is the familiar pattern of a broken, stopping and starting interaction, which leads to Sally and Abby turning away from each other, Abby turning to her thumb:

Observation at forty weeks

Abby held the ribbon in her hand, and Sally said 'give me the ribbon, Abs'. She took the ribbon from Abby, then she said 'here it is, for you,

you have the ribbon', and gave it to Abby. Then she tried to take it back from Abby, saying 'you give it to me'. Abby didn't let go of the ribbon, and Sally pulled it out of her hand. She then gave it back to Abby, and then took it away again. This pattern was repeated many times, until finally Abby looked as if she were going to cry. Her face contorted, and her eyes filled with tears and she began to suck her thumb. Sally gave the ribbon back before Abby cried, and said 'oh Abs, I'm bored of this game'.

It is striking in this example how the frustration affects both Abby and Sally. Abby seems to turn to an omnipotent state, where she needs only her thumb; Sally's frustration leads to the possibility of hope and play turning boring and bad, so that she doesn't want it anyway. It was terribly painful to watch this recurring disappointment and failure to make use of each other. However, in these two examples it is interesting to see how Abby is able to allow her mind to become curious, to investigate and play in a constructive and thoughtful way when offered the opportunity by Polly, and this was felt to be quite a relief by me and the seminar group, as it seemed to show that Abby had not withdrawn into her own internal world to the point of becoming unable to play or learn or develop.

Polly and Abby continued to play in this way, and on the last visit before the summer break, Abby's forty-third week, Abby managed to crawl to Polly. In this observation, I was struck by what an important stage this was, as it seemed to show evidence of Abby emerging into the world, trying to communicate with people and with the world around her. This was something that I, and the seminar group, had been concerned that she would be unable to do, as even her basic survival seemed so precarious. However, something did begin to shift in Abby, as she slowly began to find a way to interact with the world around her. At this point, there were other signs of Abby's beginning to relate to others, as she now looked at me occasionally during the observations, and even smiled once or twice. She began to point to things, and to make some effort to get to toys that were not directly in her reach. She remained a very small baby and slightly awkward looking, but the crawling was a very important step for Abby.

Abby continued to experiment with her crawling, her growing independence, and by the time I returned after the summer break, she was crawling confidently. During this final part of the year, the observations took place in the sitting room again, allowing Abby the space to crawl and explore – within the limits of the environment. Now that Abby was crawling and could make use of the whole room, rather than being still

in one part of it, I was struck by how little the room had changed from when I saw it in the preliminary meeting. There was virtually no evidence that a baby lived in this house, with few toys, and the room remaining neat and tidy. Abby was also able to pull herself up to a standing position and 'walk' around the edge of the room holding on to the furniture. She appeared happier than I had seen her before, and seemed to enjoy her new freedom thoroughly.

Growing independence

This last part of the observation was characterised for me by Abby's growing independence, and the sense of relief in both Sally and Abby that this was the case. I also felt a growing sense of relief that the observation was coming to an end, and guilt about this. Sally's relief was also mixed with unconscious attempts to prevent Abby from developing.

The visit in Abby's fifty-first week, the penultimate visit, seemed to encapsulate the sense of this last part of the observation. Sally and Peter had been away the week before without Abby, and Sally felt happy about this experience of 'getting back to being an independent person', and seemed relieved that Abby was no longer totally dependent on her, and could be left with the grandparents (whom Abby did not know very well at all). Additionally, Abby seemed happy with her new found independence, and, as Sally put it, 'there was no stopping her'. However, this was in spite of attempts by Sally to stop her, as the following example illustrates:

Observation at fifty-one weeks

Abby was walking round the furniture, round the room. I was just thinking how pleased she seemed with her new found mobility, having lost the rigidity that she exhibited for many months, when Sally picked up the cow that Abby doesn't like because of the noise it makes, commented on how much Abby didn't like it, and then squeezed it so it mooed. Abby stopped in her tracks, looked around, stared, stood absolutely still for a moment, and then turned around and got on with what she was doing. Sally squeezed it again. Abby turned round again, looked like she might be going to cry, then turned around and started playing with the book on the chair again. Sally squeezed it again. This time Abby turned round, made a sort of hissing, grunting noise, shook her arm at it and then turned back to the chair. Sally then went to get the pig, which, as she said, is even worse. She said 'you've got used to cow, cow is nothing compared to pig', and made pig grunt. Abby looked very frightened, and started to cry. Sally laughed, saying 'I

know I shouldn't, but I can't resist because it's so funny' ... Abby crawled back to the chair, and Sally went to get the ball (that makes different noises in different parts of the ball, so when you roll it it makes electronic noises that sounded to me like disembodied voices). She rolled it across the floor, this really did seem too much for Abby, who became extremely distressed, and sort of crumpled.

To me, these noises sounded horrible, and I had observed from previous observations that Abby always responded badly to them. Abby's behaviour seemed to confirm her disturbance, as she immediately put her thumb in her mouth, and remained very still in her body. After a few moments, she was able to recover from the attack of noises that had intruded into her mind as she began to crawl back to the chair she had been standing by before all this happened. Although this was disturbing to observe, it struck me what perseverance Abby had, that in spite of the fright and the intrusion, she perseveres and continues to find a way to survive.

This was where I had to leave Abby, with the hope that this ability to survive would continue, but full of anxieties about what life this child would be able to have, bearing in mind the struggle she has had to develop capacities for making sense out of the chaotic bombardment of hers and Sally's emotions. At this point, after one year, it seemed as though her ability for digesting and making sense was minimal, and the process that took place was more about a desperate attempt to hold herself together, which often seemed to involve an omnipotent sense of self-sufficiency.

An ending

In terms of the impact of the end of my observation, it is difficult for me to say. I feel that the way this was dealt with was captured in the final visit, when Sally said about Abby:

Observation at fifty-two weeks

'How much she has changed in the year you've been coming. Look at her now, she used to be a little bundle who couldn't do anything at all, nothing, couldn't even suck properly. Now look at her, we've got a little adult'.

The reason that I think this captures Sally's feelings about the end of my visits, is because I feel that it illustrates her need to brush over any difficult feelings, so that she acknowledges that I have been visiting for a

year, and that Abby has changed a great deal in that year, but there is no acknowledgement of anything in between Abby being a totally dependent baby, and a 'little adult'. It is as if everything messy and awkward, including possible sadness about the end of my visits, has to be brushed over. Of course, Abby is not a little adult, she is still a baby who Sally will be left with to look after, and it is that that I am leaving her with. In fact, it was left to Polly, in the final visit, to speak sadly of the end of my visits, when she talked about how difficult it has been for her in the past to leave children that she has looked after, and how fond I must be of Abby. Perhaps, again, she is fulfilling her function of digesting what is not possible for the rest of us to digest.

I found it difficult to know what effect the end of my observations had on Abby. In the final visit, she did come over to me as she was 'walking' round the room, and looked up at me. I hoped that it was evidence of her continuing development in beginning to communicate with people outside of the family. It was hard for me to leave Abby, and I did have a sense of guilt about being able to get away from this disturbance, that Abby was not able to get away from – as if my overriding impulse was to turn away.

My final contact with Sally during this observation was on the last visit when she came halfway down the stairs to say goodbye to me. It struck me as reminiscent of my first visit, when I was allowed halfway into the house. She said that if I learn anything at all from my visits that could help her, would I let her know. It seems that even though I had failed her as an expert providing her with helpful advice and monitoring, somewhere in her mind I still represented the possibility of professional advice, of a third person to help her with the unbearable anxiety of caring for her baby – and it was this possibility of help and support that was leaving her now. I felt very sad when I left, as well as incredibly relieved. I have remained in contact, and so far have had one follow-up visit.

Conclusion

Many questions arose: why it is that Abby was so difficult to observe, why her mother was not able to observe her states of mind and her needs; why there were such gaps in my own observations of aspects of her development – such as teething, weaning, individuation and separation; and why the seminar group remained distanced in many ways from the difficulties of the observation. Perhaps, as a trainee adult psychotherapist, my interests are more naturally held by the adult, the mother; perhaps the infantile, undigested states of mind were too painful to bear.

However, in this paper I hope to have given one explanation, as I

described my experience of a year's observation, which is the basic connection between the mother's inability to process the baby's projections, and all of our difficulties in keeping her in mind. I have suggested that one link between these two states is the communication given to me by Sally in our very first contact on the telephone, when she said she was interested in 'baby monitoring', as it is my opinion that the overwhelming anxieties of death and annihilation experienced by both mother and baby in an unprocessed way made it impossible to observe them together in any way other than to observe their struggle to survive – the baby's struggle to survive until the end of the first year, and the mother's struggle to survive the experience of being a mother (and my struggle to survive the experience of observing); and that this was the original reason for Sally having contacted me – to monitor her new baby. I have suggested that an additional role for me as observer was to provide a digestive function for Sally, a way for her to take in aspects of the baby in an indirect way, through my observations, without the undigested feelings provoked by direct contact. This was a role that I was not able to fulfil. The need for this third person also brought into focus the absence of the father in the observation, both physically, as he was not present during my visits, and psychically, as Sally rarely mentioned him while I was there. It was a role that was temporarily filled by Polly.

In spite of the gaps of my observations, I have endeavoured to convey something of Abby's story. This has been largely a story of attempts to hold together unintegrated states of mind with great perseverance, and the development of what Bick called 'second skin formation', and a tendency to turn away from the frustrations of the object to a more omnipotent state of mind. I have indicated the group's anxiety that Abby would not be able to relate with the external world, that her development would be stunted by the lack of processing of her sadistic and persecuting phantasies, as well as the effect of her mother's anxious and sadistic projections. However, I hope to also have shown Abby's emerging ability to communicate with and explore the world around her, with the hope that there will be a good enough experience to allow this development to continue.

Although I have not discussed Winnicott's theories on the development of the false self, as a final thought, the following quotation from Winnicott sums up for me my observation of Abby. It is not a hopeful picture for the future, as it describes the development of a false self, with the true self remaining hidden. It may also partly explain why I have been left with the feeling of observing, and not observing, the baby. Winnicott (1960) says:

When the mother's adaptation is not good enough at the start the infant might be expected to die physically, because cathexis of external objects is not initiated. The infant remains isolated. But in practice the infant lives, but lives falsely. The protest against being forced into a false existence can be detected from the earliest stages.

Notes

1. See Bion, Wilfred (1959) 'Attacks on linking', in *Second Thoughts*, pp 93-109, especially p 106: 'Projective Identification makes it possible for him to investigate his own feelings in a personality powerful enough to contain them. Denial of the use of this mechanism, either by the refusal of the mother to serve as a repository for the infant's feelings, or by the hatred and envy of the patient who cannot allow the mother to exercise this function, leads to a destruction of the link between infant and breast and consequently to a severe disorder of the impulse to be curious on which all learning depends.'
2. See Bion, Wilfred (1962) 'A theory of thinking', in *Second Thoughts*, pp 110-119, especially p 116: 'If the projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling that it is dying is stripped of such meaning as it has. It therefore reintrojects, not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread.'
3. See, e.g., Klein, 'Some theoretical conclusions regarding the emotional life of the infant' (1952), in *Envy and Gratitude* (1988), pp 64-65.
4. See, e.g., Bick, 'The experience of the skin in early object-relations', (1968), in Spillius (Ed.), *Melanie Klein Today* (1988), vol 1, pp 187-191, especially p 187: 'Disturbance in the primal skin function can lead to a development of a 'second skin' formation through which dependence on the object is replaced by a pseudo-independence, by the inappropriate use of certain mental functions, or perhaps innate talents, for the purposes of creating a substitute for this skin container function.'
5. See, e.g., Klein, 'Early stages of the Oedipus Conflict and of super-ego formation', (1932), in *The Psycho-Analysis of Children* (1932), pp 123-149.
6. See, e.g., Bick, 'The experience of the skin in early object-relations' (1968), in Spillius (Ed.), *Melanie Klein Today* (1988), vol 1, pp 187-191, especially p 187: 'But this internal function of containing the parts of the self is dependent initially on the introjection of an external object, experienced as capable of fulfilling this function ... Until the containing functions have been introjected, the concept of a space within the self cannot arise. Introjection, i.e. construction of an object in an internal space is therefore impaired.'

7. See Winnicott, 'Ego distortion in terms of true and false self' (1960), in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (1965).

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